THE DICTIONARY AS A TOOL FOR TEACHING L$_2$ WRITING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the use of the dictionary in teaching L2 writing to improve quality as measured by the incidence of errors. The research design was a simple pre-/post-test experimental design without a control group. A sample of 50 students randomly selected were pre-tested and treated for 12 weeks in the use of the dictionary for writing. Fourteen writing activities in letter, essay, and speech writing were used for the study. At the end of the treatment, the students were post-tested by replicating the pre-test. The result showed that the incidence of errors in the post-test dropped by 83 per cent demonstrating that the use of the dictionary in L2 writing improves quality in writing as measured by the incidence of grammatical errors.

KEYWORDS: Dictionary Use, L$_2$ Writing, Secondary Schools, Error Gravity

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the means of improving the quality of writing of Nigerian secondary school students and, indeed, all L$_2$ secondary school students, noted for poor writing, throughout the world. Writing in Nigerian English language classroom is taught not only to make students literate, but also to help them pass their School Certificate English Language Examination (SCELE) with at least a minimum of credit level pass to enable them to either gain admission into Nigerian universities or secure a white collar job for School Certificate holders. The expectation of all English language teachers in Nigeria is to have at least 90 per cent of their students attaining a minimum of credit level pass in their SCELE. The question, however, is: To what extent is the teachers' expectation realized in the SCELE? Below is a sample result of SCELE from 2007-2011 for 15 randomly selected secondary schools in the Southeast geopolitical zones in Nigeria comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States.

**Table 1: Statistics of School Certificate English Language Examination
Results of Sampled Nigerian Schools from 2007-2011 Grades**

Year	No of Candidates	A1	A2	B3	B4	C5	C6	P 7	P8	F9	Total
2007	1052	-	3	5	8	150	156	225	249	256	1052
2008	1197	-	2	3	3	175	226	230	235	293	1197
2009	955	-	5	7	10	163	195	145	152	278	955
2010	1002	-	12	40	52	184	206	200	203	105	1002
2011	1092	-	8	20	30	296	351	87	155	145	1092
Total %	**5298**	**-**		**2410 43.7%**					**2888 56.3%**		**5298 100%**

Incidentally, assessment in the examination is accuracy-based focusing on grammar and mechanics as major parameters while appropriateness of writing to its genre is a secondary parameter. In a communicatively-based assessment, the parameters for assessment are appropriateness of writing to its genre, range of cohesive elements for connecting

sentences, and the degree of variety in sentence structure (Hedge 1999). In the accuracy-based assessment, the marks fall within the range of 1-9 and are matched with letter grades as follows: A1-A2 (excellent), B1-B2 (very good), C5 (good), and C6 (average), P7-P8 (pass), and F9 (fail). Table 1, therefore, shows that a total of 5,298 candidates sat for the SCELE from 2007-2011 in the study area sampled. Of this figure, 2,410 (43.7 per cent) passed with a minimum of credit level pass while 2,888 (56.3 per cent) passed below the credit level. The statistics paint a disappointing picture for the English language teachers. This is, indeed, a better picture compared with the national average which is so poor that it has become a matter of public debate in the Nigerian National Assembly on the causes of mass failure in SCELE. There are many possible causes for the current state of affairs. Among the causes are the teacher factor (teachers' proficiency to impart knowledge), pedagogy (method of teaching), resource materials (nature of textbooks in use), student factor (student attitude to learning), and environment (learning environment). Of these possible causes, the one that has generated great research interest is pedagogy.

In spite of his research finding that no single method[1] is superior to others (Sherwin, 1969), innovations in L_2 writing pedagogy continue to mushroom. Two theories account for this development (Warnock, 1973). The first theory suggests that students suffer from what this study terms "tabula rasa syndrome" (having nothing in their brains to write about). The teaching goal is to provide the students with basic knowledge of content and its organizational pattern. The second theory states that students lack expressive power and, therefore, the need to teach them strategies for expressing themselves. Against this background, innovations in L_2 writing have witnessed three major paradigm shifts –the product, process, and computer-mediated methods.

Influenced by the rhetorical theory of writing that emphasized "inventing, arrangement, and style" (Winterowd, 1973:702), the product method made its debut with a focus on the teacher and accuracy. It was analytical in techniques and was closely associated with the grammar-translation method of language teaching. Teachers made students analyze the structure of extracts from well-known authors. The extracts formed the model for students' composition and they were encouraged to imitate the model in terms of arrangement, style, grammatical and mechanical accuracy— imitation echoed behaviorism. With the replacement of grammar-translation method with audio-lingual method of language teaching, the classical product method was replaced by the control expression method (Pincas, 1963). Retaining the accuracy and teacher-centeredness of the classical product method, the controlled method was concerned with accuracy which was taught, following the principles of audio-lingual method, through substitution of linguistic form in sentences. The substitution drills ranged from words in sentences of various forms to sentences in paragraphs. To complete the circle of accuracy in writing, focus on content, organization, and accuracy became the concern of the paragraph development method. Topic sentences were developed into paragraphs and complete essays were written, using the paragraph principle. The use of outline became the guide for writing essays.

The next innovation which appears to replace the product method and its modifications is the process method. A cognitively-based approach to writing, the process method is the employment of the cognitive strategies of "setting goals, generating ideas, organizing information, selecting appropriate language, drafting, revising and editing" (Hedge, 1999:683). Thus, the process method is anchored in the theory that writing is a cognitive skill involving appropriate strategies and processes (Connor, 1999). The process most often noted are prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Ellis 2000). This means that writing is ordered. However, post-process research has demonstrated

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[1]*Method* is defined as an innovative teaching action plan with or without underlying theory, but characterized by class activities for the attainment of set objectives.

that the order is not fixed, but recursive as the writer moves forth and back from one step to the other (Cary, 2012). Although the process method can be individualized (students working independently), it is often associated with group work in L$_2$ context because students benefit from one another through group interaction as ideas are pooled together (Storch, 2005). The use of collaborative effort is informed by sociocultural theory that stresses the relationship between social interaction and the cognitive development of the individual (Brown 2007). Unfortunately, the process method has not gained the attention it deserves in L$_2$ writing classroom in Nigeria, where the controlled expression and paragraph development methods are popularly used.

Lastly, the exploitation of high-tech resources in L2 writing pedagogy is the latest development in the innovative process. Currently, there are computer-mediated writing programs (Ng, 1999), use of the computer in teaching grammar (Jarvis &Szymczyk, 2010) and the use of such software as word processor, concordancers, Google eduAdvanced search (Stapleton &Radia, 2010) as aids to writing. Applications of high-tech resources work effectively in the language classroom where appropriate infrastructural facilities are in place—constant electricity supply, availability of the software, personnel for repair and maintenance of the hard and software, digital natives (people to whom computers have become their culture (Jarvis &Szymczyk, 2010). The advantage of the use of high-tech resources in L$_2$ writing is the autonomy and freedom it offers to the student (Jarvis and Szymczyk,, 2010) in the learning process and the relief it gives the language teacher from the drudgery of classroom routines—marking of scripts and class management.

In Nigeria, high-tech educational resources are unavailable in the primary and secondary schools. In addition, the infrastructural supports mentioned above are non-existent. Therefore, the Nigerian secondary school English language teachers are compelled to make optimum use of available educational resources in the form of government prescribed textbooks, teachers' guides and syllabus to make the students not only literate, but also to prepare them for SCELE, an examination that determines their future after the secondary school. Because the teachers have no input in the choice of government recommended textbooks/syllabus and because the recommended textbooks are written by Nigerian textbook authors in line with the specifications in the syllabus, teachers are compelled to follow the methodology in the books they use for teaching. The popular methods in L$_2$ writing are controlled and paragraph development methods. In terms of grammar teaching, the most popular method is explicit/ deductive in which the students learn grammatical and mechanical rules and apply them in writing.

In a study on the causes of poor writing among Nigerian secondary school students, it was revealed that the major cause is the teachers' too much emphasis on grammar, spelling, and punctuation as marks of good writing (Okoye, 1991). This emphasis induces fear, tabula rasa syndrome, and subsequent hatred for writing. Okoye's study, in the opinion of this study, is a sad commentary on teaching method. It does underscore the need to explore alternative methods that could improve the quality of students writing and, at the same time, make the teaching of grammar and writing pleasurable exercises. The alternative is the dictionary method, which appears to be unexplored in the literature of L$_2$ writing.

The dictionary method is the teaching of how students can apply the rich linguistic resources in abridged dictionaries like *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English,* which addresses writing problems of L$_2$ writers, in the process of writing to minimize the incidence of errors in accuracy-based context of writing. It is noted that the dictionary is not only a tool for checking spelling and meaning as it is generally believed by both teachers and students, but also a source of vital information for the budding L$_2$ writer. For instance, it provides information on spelling by treating homographs, and compound words to enable the young writer to spell these problematic words well. For consistency in spelling, American and British spellings are provided. Grammatical accuracy in the use of words is assured with such information on number for nouns, tense for verbs, comparison of adjectives and adverbs, restrictions imposed by usage on

these parts of speech are also provided. Appropriateness in the choice of words is solved through information on usage labels (formal, informal, colloquial, slang, etc), frequency of usage of some common words, synonyms, antonyms, collocational patterns of words, a major problem in L_2 writing, and idiomatic expressions to enrich vocabulary, another major problem in L_2writing, are adequately supplied. Finally, the various meanings of a given word are provided and contextualized to avoid the problem of malapropism (using words in the wrong context). The use of each meaning is illustrated with either phrases or sentences as the case may be. These illustrative sentences are useful guides for the L_2 writer to learn how to use the meanings in sentences. Armed with these linguistic resources, this study explores how these resources could be used to improve the quality of students' writing. To this end, the question investigated in this study is: How can the dictionary be used to improve the quality of students' writing for accuracy-based assessment?

METHOD

The students for this study were randomly selected from one of the schools whose School Certificate results appeared in Table 1. They comprised 50 final year students. A pre-/post-test simple experimental design without a control group was used. This simple design was used because the students have been immersed in the teaching of grammar, mechanics, and writing for the past five years of the six-year secondary school career. Writing was taught explicitly, using the controlled and paragraph development methods. The study occurred during the normal English class sessions and lasted for twelve weeks. At the commencement of the study, the students were pre-tested. The pre-test occurred during the first two contact periods and consisted of three writing activities done under examination condition to ensure that the students performed optimally. The first pre-test was two letters of apology of 250 words each. One was addressed to a friend for hurting feeling. The other was addressed to the School Principal for insubordination. The second pre-test was an essay of 400 words on "My Favourite Sports". At the end of the study, the students were post-tested by replicating the pre-tests.

There are two parts to the study. The first was an interactive session on the use of the dictionary, using reading passages. The goal was to sensitize the students in the rich linguistic resources of the dictionary to correct the erroneous impression that the dictionary is for checking spelling and meaning. The use of the dictionary that was of great interest to this study was its use for writing. Its resources for pronunciation and the historical root (etymology) of words were not investigated. The second part of the study was also an interactive session on writing which focused on letter, essay and speech writing, using the dictionary as a ready reference tool to solve writing problems of the L_2 writer such as appropriate choice of words, collocations, number, agreement, tense, spelling, and punctuation.

For the study in the use of dictionary, excerpts of about 350 words were drawn from the fields of sports, religion, politics, entertainment, advertising, diseases, transportation, and education—fields of current interest among Nigerian youth. For each excerpt, two exercises were provided. The first was five comprehension questions designed to help the students to understand the central theme of the passage. The second was a list of key words from the excerpt to give the students practice on the use of the dictionary. Students were allowed five minutes to read the passage silently. Thereafter, the teacher read aloud the passage to the students to ensure comprehension. The comprehension questions were answered orally by students as the teacher directed. Volunteers helped students who had problems with the questions. From the answers, the group worked out the central theme of the passage and discussed it briefly. Key words from the passage were written on the chalkboard. As the teacher mentioned each word on the chalkboard, the students were directed to find it in the dictionary. The first to find the word was given a prize. For each word, the following pieces of information were checked: part of speech, spelling variations, usage restrictions, as in the case of noun (singular, plural restrictions, non-count). Such restrictions have implications for sentence agreement. Other pieces of information checked were: usage label (formal, informal, colloquial, slang, taboo), collocations of the word, the various meanings of the word and the

illustrative sentences for each meaning, the meaning of the word appropriate to the passage and its illustrative sentence, synonyms, antonyms, and idiomatic expression of each word. After examining all the information which the dictionary has for each word, questions leading the students to understand the rich linguistic resources contained for each word were asked. The students were led to understand the value of each piece of information to writing especially the illustrative sentences which demonstrate how the various meanings of the words can be expressed in sentences and how the grammatical information is used in sentences.

Writing activities were used to demonstrate the application of the dictionary in the writing process. There were 14 writing activities as follows: nine for letter, three for essay, and two for speech writing. The focus on each topic was on format, content, and the use of the dictionary to check relevant information on suggested words for the content. To this end, the students worked out, with the guidance of the teacher, the format and content of each topic. Similarly, typical key words for the contents were suggested and listed on the chalkboard. For each word, the students checked for all the information on it as practiced during the session on the use of the dictionary. The meaning appropriate to the writing activity was selected and its illustrative sentence written on the chalkboard. Students were selected to write their own sentences on the chalkboard, using the illustrative sentence from the dictionary as a model. The students' sentences provided the opportunity to teach grammar and mechanics inductively. After the discussion on grammar, the students drew an outline for the writing activity. Guided by the teacher, the students wrote collectively on the selected topic using the key words which have been checked in the dictionary. The collective writing was collectively edited. The teacher read the final version to the students and erased it from the chalkboard. The students were assigned to write on the same topic individually, using recall from class activities and submit to the teacher for assessment. The teacher corrected the individual writing by pointing out areas which needed improvement. No overt marks were awarded. However, the teacher noted and read out to the group the best scripts and awarded prizes to the writers. At the end of the study, the group was post-tested by the replicating the pre-test. The tests were marked, using the three parameters of grammar, mechanics, and appropriateness to determine the incidence of errors in the three parameters in both the pre-/post-tests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 2: Frequency of Error Types

Error Types	Pretest	Posttest	% Gain
Grammatical	385	80	
Mechanical	350	60	
Appropriateness	300	40	
Total	**1035**	**180**	**83%**

Table 2 reveals that the frequency of errors for the pre-test was 1,035 as opposed to 180 for the post-test. There was 83 per cent reduction in the frequency of errors in the post-test. Although the study did not produce error-proof result, it did reveal a drastic reduction in the incidence of errors. This indicated improvement in the quality of writing as measured by the parameters of accuracy-induced assessment. There are possible reasons for this development. The major reason is students' awareness and exploitation of the rich linguistic resources of the dictionary in the writing activities. The use of the dictionary helped in tackling such problems as appropriate choice of words, collocations, number, tense, agreement, spelling, and sentence structure. To motivate the students to learn, a number of techniques were employed. First, prizes were awarded to deserving ones. Second, the collaborative effort in writing helped those suffering from "tabula rasa syndrome" to have clues on what to write about and how to write it as ideas were pooled together (Storch,, 2005.) by the group. Finally, the teaching of grammar and mechanics was discussed inductively.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concluded from the result of this study that the use of the dictionary in L_2 writing among secondary school students is an effective tool in improving quality of L_2 writing in terms of the incidence of errors in an accuracy-based assessment context.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The conclusion drawn from this study stresses the need to teach Nigerian secondary school students and, indeed, all L_2 writers in secondary schools throughout the world how to use the dictionary for writing. The teaching and its practice should help the students to form the habit of using the dictionary each time they write to solve their linguistic problems.

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